

MID TERM PAPER

Sino –Afghan Relations

Policy options for Pakistan

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Sino Afghanistan Relations and Policy Options for Pakistan

Abstract. *China and Afghanistan are bordering countries and both has been maintaining a nominal relationships for decades , Pakistan is a common factor which has borders with both countries and enjoys special place in China's foreign policy, on the other hand Pakistan sees Afghanistan as part of its own strategic policy and have deep and long rooted stakes in it. With the withdrawal of USA from Afghanistan after two decades the tri-relationship now assumes a greater significance.*

Premise.

With the pullout of USA troops from Afghanistan the importance of peace and stability within the Afghanistan has become paramount for the overall prosperity and connectivity in the region.¹ In international relations the last four decades have been quite dramatic and their impact and effects are being felt now with a greater shadow on the forthcoming era. In 1960s , China and Russia were both communist regimes and strong ally but a border dispute in 1967 put an end to their friendship. Afghanistan despite being a Muslim country fostered strong political and ideological relations with Moscow which resulted in the invasion of USSR and then a decade long insurgency in which Pakistan played an important role , USA provided the financial and military support. In the end USSR was broken and Afghanistan entered into a chaos . Pakistan being a neighbouring country has historical friendship and enmity with Afghanistan to an extent that among the common perception the Afghanistan is never regarded as a trustworthy friend. Geography plays a key role , being landlocked Afghanistan relies upon Pakistan for all its imports and exports via Karachi seaport, although it has its own advantages and disadvantages to Pakistan economy.

In the post 9/11, USA invaded Afghanistan and Pakistan became a frontline ally and country, Pakistan is among those very few countries in the world perhaps the only one which maintains a very cordial relationship with both China and USA; however Pakistan rely more upon USA for its economy and on China for security. Kashmir and India are also another variable in Pakistan –China friendship, as China does have a border dispute with India.

Between 2001-2012, the region witnessed the unprecedented rise of Chinese economic might to an extent that it has become world's second largest economy.² Pakistan in the meantime lacked or perhaps failed to achieve the economic targets which it is capable , yet the war on terror took its toll on economy. Pakistan and USA relations took a nose dive in the aftermath of Osama Bin laden raid in 2011 and since then they are in a cold. In 2012 the

¹ China Is Worried About a Post-U.S. Afghanistan. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/16/china-us-afghanistan-withdrawal/>

² Asian Survey, Vol. 58, Number 2, pp. 281–301. ISSN0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2018DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2018.58.2.281>.
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new Chinese President Xi launched the OBOR an economic philosophy which envisions linking China with Europe and Africa through the land and sea routes.³ In this plan, Pakistan's gateway port is the heart and Pakistan and China signed CPEC in 2014, in which China is expected to invest over US \$ 50 Billion in Pakistan in improving its infrastructure. However despite lapse of seven years the Pakistan's economy is still at the bottom among the regional economies.⁴

Afghanistan has by ensuring the withdrawal of USA and other western countries has confirmed the historical hypothesis that history repeats itself first as tragedy second as farce.

Ontological Assumptions. There are no permanent friend or foes in international politics. The realist theory that states do look after their interest as primary reason is true yet in Afghanistan it is the religion or the ideology which is foremost and its importance cannot be denied or underrated. Afghanistan is a tribal society, it is partially a state however the tribal way of life is more dominant, religion is the core of Afghanistan's political and economical way of life. China has an imperial past and like all other super powers it seldom hesitates in using force to achieve its goal. At present China is pursuing an economic vision, yet the border areas of China are predominantly Muslim. Pakistan at present is overly relying upon China for its economics and military needs yet it has failed to bring its economy at par with regional countries. Form of government in China is dictatorial, in Pakistan it is hybrid with military calling the shots, in Afghanistan political system is fragile. USA after its withdrawal is seeking a partner and Pakistan is the most natural partner. Afghanistan offers a giant opportunity to Pakistan to revive its own economy through reconstruction process in neighbouring country. China is under USA sanctions.

Aim. To analyse the policy options for Pakistan, in view of the Sino- Afghanistan relationships in post USA withdrawal.

Theoretically, international politics and relations are assessed and viewed in traditional paradigm of Realism, which is now more than a fact rather a theory⁵, hinging on the fact that every state first and foremost keeps its own interest as paramount. Power is the main theme of realism however in the context of state the very concept of power is a variable. In democratic regime the structure is important but in case of dictatorship the power implies the personality of the ruler. In China there is one party the CCP with President Xi enjoying unlimited power and will keep on having these powers for next one or two or more decades. Same is not the case with Pakistan where the power is being divided among political parties, military and judiciary Samuel Huntington's hypothesis of Clash of Civilisation⁶ stresses the role of history in the present and future relationships among the states. Thus Pakistan, China

³ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>

⁴ Van der Kley, Dirk. *China's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan*. Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2014, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10138. Accessed 18 July 2021.

⁵ Kenneth Waltz *Theory of International Politics* (London: Addison, 1978), pp.30-55

⁶ [Huntington, Samuel P.](#), *The Clash of Civilizations?*, in "Foreign Affairs", vol. 72, no. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22–49.also see by same author *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

and Afghanistan should be seen more as civilisations rather than mere states. Religion or more specifically Islam has emerged as the most powerful paradigm or theory in international politics and relations, there seems to be no similarity in west on this parallel. Islam is a power by itself and this power is with the people and with ordinary religious teacher. In March 2021, the riots in Pakistan over the French president remarks⁷ about the Prophet (PBUH, last Prophet) practically brought the life standstill in major cities of Pakistan within hour. Last week similar emotions were seen in support for the Palestine across Pakistan. Thus in the region, Islam is the most important factor which can over-ride political, economical and military needs, this is more prominent in Afghanistan than in any other country. Thus theoretically, Pakistan, China, Afghanistan represents three different perceptions about the religion.

Methodology. The epistemology is based upon the published books on the history of Afghanistan, the research reports of US Congress and European Union, the articles in scholarly journals and newspapers of Pakistan, China, Afghanistan and USA.

Sino –Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations; repetition of history

Historically both countries have enjoyed a commercial link since the dawn of civilisation, they first established ambassadorial contacts in 140 BC, the reason was the insecurity of Emperor Wu of Han dynasty regarding a rebel tribe. Trade between two kingdom flourished as Emperor Babar noted in his Tuzk that Chinese goods were being traded at Kabul; incidentally Chinese called Kabul as Kao-Fu. In modern time the two countries signed their first treaty in 1944 at Ankara as treaty of Amity. After the formation of Peoples Republic of China (PRK) the diplomatic relations were established in January 1955. In 1957 not only trade started among these two countries which included tea from China but also the very first bicycle manufacturing factory was also established by China in Kabul. Premier Chou En Lai visited Kabul in January 1957. At that precise time, Pakistan was the odd country and common factor among the developing relations between China and Afghanistan. China viewed and regarded Pakistan as a capitalist proxy by virtue of its being member of CENTO and SEATO military alliances, Afghanistan had the border dispute with Pakistan.

In 1960, China and Afghanistan signed a Treaty of Friendship⁸, it was a simple treaty without any military alliance clauses in it. Both countries stressing mutual respect and also agreeing not to allow any military build up or base to be used against each other. The very question that has been raised at present ‘Pakistan’s policy option in view of Sino-Afghanistan’ must have been raised at that time. The treaty had strategic implication for Pakistan, as it felt being surrounded on three sides by hostile countries namely India, China and Afghanistan; and among these three China had treaties with other two thus Pakistan very

⁷ France urges citizens to leave Pakistan amid anti-French protests <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56760224>

⁸ Dai, Shen-Yu. “China and Afghanistan.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 25, 1966, pp. 213–221. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3082103. Accessed 18 July 2021.

rightly adjudged that best policy option is to have friendly ties with China itself, the largest and more powerful country. Therefore it was the Sino-Afghanistan relations in 1960 that acted as catalyst for the latter friendly ties among Pakistan and China.

Chinese in sixties were very sensitive regarding their border demarcation⁹, they settled their border affairs with Afghanistan in May 1963, soon after the war with India over the similar border settlement in 1962. Pakistan which had initiated the friendly ties with China in 1960 with the very first PIA flight to Shanghai, the high point of these relations were the visit of Premier Chou En Lai to Pakistan in 1964 and also the settling of border with China by Pakistan in which Pakistan acceded to Chinese demands of over 10, 000 square kilometres of territory in northern areas; since then both countries have moved forward.

Afghanistan on the other hand despite being the very first country to initiate friendly relations with China lost the race, the major reason was the USSR with whom it had more deeper ties than China, secondly the coup of 1978 in Afghanistan put the country into an abyss of anarchy. Afghanistan for last four decades is embroiled in a civil war, it is a state where the institutions has been weakened by the war. The country itself is ethnically and geographically divided into two main parts, the north is more agriculturist as Amu Darya acts as the state border with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The population is more liberal and have orientation towards Persia and surrounding countries; also they adhere to Shia faith of Islam. The eastern and south eastern portion of country is more populous, more radical, conservative and comprises of Pashtun tribes, which are spilled across into Pakistan. Kabul the capital is situated at the watershed. Afghanistan¹⁰ is a country comprising of tribes and its history from 1740s till to-date revolves around these tribes and their own way of life. These tribes were to a great extent pacified by the successive kings or amirs of Afghanistan from 1890s till 1973 when monarchy was abolished through a coup. The USSR invasion brought the historical warrior culture of the tribes into limelight as these tribes not only fought against a superpower but also defeated it. This also marked the revival of Islam in the country in a militant manner. The subsequent civil war among the Pashtun and Northerners in early nineties and the rise of Taliban again foster the religious and ethnic fault lines of the country. The USA invasion brought heavy financial aid for the country, the west also tried to give re-birth to state of Afghanistan through modern concept of constitution and gender equality. Not that the country lacked any constitution, infact Afghanistan was among the very first Muslim and regional states to have a constitution back in 1922. What distinguishes Afghan culture is its orthodox and conservative approach towards the feminine gender. Opium and other drugs are the main source of tribal economy, other than these the country apparently is rich in minerals but yet to be tapped. Agriculture area and products is barely sufficient to meet the domestic requirement, whereas fruit and dry fruit are exported to neighbouring countries.

⁹ Segal, Gerald. "China and Afghanistan." *Asian Survey*, vol. 21, no. 11, 1981, pp. 1158–1174. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2644000. Accessed 18 July 2021.

¹⁰ Afghanistan country brief <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/afghanistan/afghanistan-country-brief>

Pakistan's perspective and narrative towards Afghanistan is based upon its own structural and ethnic setup. The country on birth in 1947 was carved out of British India and at that time it was the NWFP or the Pashtun who politically opposed the Muslim League. From early days of Pakistan till the USSR invasion Pakistani public always had an opposing views towards the Afghanistan, NWFP, Pashtun and above the tribal areas remained a mystery for majority of people. The rise of Taliban further fuelled this perception, the reason being that people living in south (Karachi) and Punjab have seldom travelled to these parts thus their perception is engraved from childhood and unfortunately this perception is not very positive.¹¹

Pakistan as a society is hybrid in nature, it has modern outlook in urban areas and also among the rural areas of Punjab however it is the tribal society bordering Afghanistan which still adheres to conservative approach especially towards the feminine members. As the tribes are spilled over on both side of the western borders thus smuggling is a way of life, and this particular act of smuggling is always projected out of proportion by the officials not belonging to the tribal areas.

Present and Future

From the above it is apparent that Afghanistan has little to offer to any country in terms of resources rather the country is plagued with anarchy. Thus what advantages China can have in maintaining close relations with Afghanistan and why it should compel Pakistan to review its policy towards Afghanistan.

Obviously the situation at present is different from 1960 when Pakistan took a drastic action by closing down the borders with Afghanistan, when it had signed treaty of friendship with China.

China apparently has no declared motive other than economics, trade, bi lateral relations; it will not be out of proportion that both Afghanistan and China are looking at the *1960 Treaty Clauses* as still applicable in present and future. Afghanistan on its part had already acted by granting Chinese firms the right to explore Aynak Copper Mines a contract worth 3.5 US \$ Billions in 2010. In 2018, China also got the oil exploration rights in Amu Darya. Apart from these two major commercial agreements, China has built the fibre optics

¹¹ The Durand Line Agreement between Abdur Rehman and Mortimer Durand was signed on November 12, 1893, which formulated the formal borders between British India and Afghanistan. The Durand Line extends approximately 1400 miles from the Sarikol range in the north to the Afghanistan border in the southwest. The treaty was rectified in 1905, 1919, 1920 and 1921 with certain amendments, there were minor adjustments. For more detail see American Institute of Afghan Studies "The Durand Line: History, Consequences and Future." Nov 2007. <http://www.hollingscenter.org/Reports/07-2007>, Hayat, Azmat, *The Durand Line Its Geo-Strategic Importance*. Islamabad : Pan Graphics, 2000.

in Afghanistan (again it was in 1960 that China pledged to built ultra high frequency radio communication in Afghanistan).

In these economics, Pakistan has little role to play, Pakistan cannot be competitor with China and neither Chinese investments in Afghanistan pose any direct threat to Pakistan commercial links. However, Pakistan is the most advanced neighbour of Afghanistan and as such rightly deserves to reap economic benefits of reconstruction in Afghanistan. Therefore Pakistan has to act as collaborator in these economics projects.

China's major and main concern as is obvious from a wide range of publications is the issue of Sinkiang Muslims and all these economical aid and grant being poured into the Afghanistan has this ethnic unrest in Chinese bordering autonomous region with Afghanistan through the narrow strip at Wakhan and also through Tajikistan and Pakistan as the main , major and serious concern of China.¹²

Shanghai Co-operation Organisation SCO

SCO in which Pakistan is also a member and which is predominantly headed and influenced by the China, the core reason of SCO formation was the border issue resolutions among the member states specifically among the Central Asian States and China and later it evolved to counter terrorism with regional anti terror force (RAT). Therefore Pakistan and China do have a common forum to discuss such issues. There are speculations that soon Afghanistan will also become a member of SCO. Already Pakistan-China- Afghanistan do have a foreign minister level forum established in 2018 which is a platform to discuss regional issues.¹³

The focus so far has been only on economics and on the peace deal of Taliban with the Ashraf Ghani government and China by virtue of its economic might and being a neighbour is trying to assert itself.

China needs Afghanistan for the success of OBOR, it is the geography of Afghanistan which is important, it allows the proposed railways network to proceed from Chinese Sinkiang via Afghanistan to Gwador sea port.

Future Uncertainty

History repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce. The most likely hypothesis regarding the forthcoming months in Afghanistan are based upon its history of recent time. Country is likely to plunge into anarchy with the violent struggle for power among the Pashtun and Northern. Killing, car bombs, target killing of non sunni Muslims, anti feminine

¹² Choudhary, L.K. "ISLAMIC MILITANCY AND TERRORISM IN XINJIANG: CHINA'S ANXIETIES AND CONCERNS." *India Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2002, pp. 69–92. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/45073494. Accessed 18 July 2021.

¹³ Ali, Ghulam (2017) *China Pakistan relations a historical analysis* Karachi: Oxford.

violence. Already two weeks ago a car bomb in Kabul killed over sixty Shia girls. Amidst this , the economic stability is very difficult to even survive.

China , as already highlighted has main concern about its own stability in its Sinkiang province and to safeguard it, China has pledged to construct military base in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan, close to Pakistan's Chitral district. If and when the violence breaks out in Afghanistan then naturally the Chinese are going to favour more the Northern Alliance rather than the Pashtun for the reason that Northerners are more closer to their borders and above all are more liberals.

In second hypothesis, the future is peaceful , with a harmonious transition of power among the Taliban and the present regime, this scenario allows the economic activities to be generated . The rail link between Uzbekistan –Kabul- Peshawar to be completed. The proposed railways among the five countries of CAR taking a practical implication. Extension of road and other infrastructures in Afghanistan on similar lines as in CPEC taking place. The OBOR extending to Pakistan via Afghanistan.

Policy Options for Pakistan.

Pakistan at present has almost become a proxy of China, it now enjoys the same status which UK enjoys with USA ; in simple words such relationship devoid country of having an independent foreign policy. In terms of Pakistan it means almost delinking itself from USA. Such a policy is not in very nature of Pakistan's policy culture yet the public opinion is anti USA in Pakistan. The fact remains that USA and EU are Pakistan's major and biggest trade partners .

Sino –Afghan relationship are a welcome sign and it offers a good opportunity for Pakistan to improve its own economy. The drawback is that so far the Chinese have failed to live upto the expectations. They have not altered the trade imbalance with Pakistan. The CPEC is an enigma for the people and even for scholars, the fact remains that it is the Gwadar deep sea port which is the heart of the entire CPEC and till todate it has not been linked with the national railways link and neither there is any plan to link it in near future. The media projection of a railways to be constructed through Himalayas is more of a fantasy than reality.

Pakistan should reassess its Afghan policy , the fencing of the border which started in 2014 has serve little purpose, the violence is still taking place along the border region on regular basis. Fences do not provide a complete security rather they hamper the existing socio links among the tribes.

The political situation of PTM now needs a more urgent solution, the tribes especially the Wazir must be pacified because an agitated Wazir is dangerous as a n act of a single tribesman can jeopardise the entire peace in the region. As we have witnessed the violence does not start from the top rather it has often roots in the base of the pyramid.

Conclusion.

Sino- Afghanistan relations success in coming days depends upon the Pakistan policy towards Afghanistan itself. It needs a change and as such the defencing of the border must be considered. An open or preferential treatment must be afforded to Afghanistan. It is irony that Pakistan has declared visa on arrival for over fifty countries but Afghanistan is not included in it. Pakistan should now de-hostilised its media against Afghanistan and promote and encourage a more friendly attitude towards the Afghanistan.¹⁴

It will be in Pakistan's own interest if the Chinese investment in Afghanistan improves the country infrastructure and thus Pakistan's requirement of natural gas and electricity through TAPI and CASA-1000 are fulfilled. Railways are the main arteries of trade and Pakistan lacks badly in this aspect therefore improvement in railways and linking of Gwador with national and international railways network should be a priority. The proposed motorway between Peshawar and Kabul will definitely improve the connectivity between Pakistan and Afghanistan and into Central Asia. Pakistan should stress upon the other two countries in opening more border crossing points specially in Chitral District. The road link between Peshawar –Jalalabad-Chitral was inaugurated in 2010 but then postponed; it should be revived as it will open up a trade route in Badakshan-Chitral.

Pakistan should keep its traditional relationship with USA and West, because this has been the hallmark of our foreign policy and coming days provides Pakistan an opportunity to once again plays a 'common friend' role in the Sino-Afghanistan relations.

End Statement

Sino-Afghanistan relationships are more based upon the security concerns of China and basing upon the recent history there are ample reasons to believe that Afghanistan will soon fall into a civil unrest. Pakistan at the moment and in near future have no other option but to follow the Chinese policies and they are beneficial for Pakistan's economy. The USA withdrawal provides Pakistan with an opportunity to play a double game reassert its own foreign policy and thereby improving its economy.

¹⁴ <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/promises-and-pitfalls-sino-afghan-relations>

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